

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My mother is driving me crazy! She claims to love me, but then says nasty things about me to other family members. Recently she bought me a blouse for a birthday present, actually two, and asked me to choose the one I liked best. I picked one and then she said, "Oh, you don't like the other one I picked out for you?" I'm trying to lose weight by cutting out sweets. She'll come to our house with a basket of fresh-baked cookies. I'll say, "They look great, but I'm on a diet." She'll beg me to at least try one and pouts if I stick to my guns. So mostly, I'll eat a cookie, just to be polite. Before I've finished swallowing, she'll say something mean like, "Have you put on a few pounds lately?" I get so mad, that I end up yelling at my mother, she leaves, then I feel guilty, and before an hour is up, I'm on the phone apologizing to her. Help! Do you see why I'm going crazy?

-- Going Nuts

Dear Nuts,

I can see why you feel like you're going nuts, because your mother seems to be a master of the "double-bind," also known as paradoxical intent. This term was coined in the 1950's by social scientist Gregory Bateson and other researchers studying family dynamics. As you can tell by your experiences with blouses and cookies, it seems like there is no way to win this Catch-22, "damned if you do, damned if you don't" conflict.

There's no easy way to deal with your mother's crazy-making communications, but I can tell you that the way you've been handling it is not the answer. Be comforted by the fact that you have excellent insight, and recognize the paradox of the messages that your mother gives you.

Your mother may – consciously or unconsciously – be looking for the exact response you so routinely deliver to her: you feel guilty and then apologize to her. I can see her now, gleefully chanting "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child," as she sees your number light up on her caller id. By taking full responsibility for the unpleasant interaction, your apology allows her to feel like a victim, and see you as the ungrateful, out-of-control daughter. How could you be so mean to her? After all, all she did was allow you to select your birthday gift and munch down some of her delicious cookies. Right off the bat, let's agree that what you are doing isn't working, and therefore, any other solution should be tried.

You could try being very direct without being confrontational. In a calm manner, say, "Mom, when you ask me to eat a cookie and I decline, then you beg, then I eat one, then you tell me I'm getting fat, it makes me crazy. Do you realize that you are putting me in a situation where I can't win? Do you understand the double bind you put me in?" Then listen. Let's see if Mom has any insight at all into her behavior. My guess is that this level of authentic communication will startle your mother. This could awaken her to the stressful situations she puts you in with these double-bind messages.

Your mother's intolerable method of communicating is most likely sapping your energy and causing you stress. Her regularity of presenting you with these no-win situations might even make you feel like moving to a new town without leaving a

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony

3/9/05

forwarding address. But you can change that. When your mother confronts you with a “no-win” game, decline to play without apology. You can do so firmly but calmly, without theatrics, and hopefully your mother will learn that you are no longer a good source for the emotional “fix” or boost that she craves. You might not be able to make her understand or change her behavior, but you have full control over your reactions to her.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2005 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.